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# Piquing the Interest of African American Students in Foreign Languages: The Case of Spelman College

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*Anthony G. Dahl*

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SPELMAN College, located in Atlanta, Georgia, has been educating young African American women since 1881 and currently has an enrollment of approximately 1,800 students from all over the United States—with significant representation from California, Massachusetts, New York, Illinois and Texas—as well as from Africa and the Caribbean. Its enrollment has been steadily increasing, and the college is actively negotiating to purchase more land for expansion. The young women of Spelman study a liberal arts program with diverse majors such as Spanish and French, premed, dual degree engineering, and music.

Spelman is one of six historically black colleges and universities that make up the Atlanta University Center. The center shares a central library, donated by Robert Woodruff, of Coca-Cola fame, and publishes a common schedule, allowing students to take courses at any of the center institutions. The other institutions of the Atlanta University Center are Morehouse College for men; Morris Brown College and Clark-Atlanta University, which are co-ed; Clark-Atlanta University, the graduate school for the center, which teaches courses up to the PhD level; the Interdenominational Theological Seminary; and the Morehouse School of Medicine. German, Chinese, and Swahili are also available to students at center institutions.

The Department of Foreign Languages at Spelman teaches Spanish, French, Latin, and Japanese. First-year students with at least one year of high school Spanish, French, German, Latin, or the equivalent take a placement exam on arrival at Spelman. Over the past eight years since I have been at Spelman, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of students who have had at least one year of high school Spanish and in the number of majors and minors in Spanish. The following examples attest to the rising level of interest in Spanish. Toward the end of fall semester 1997, I was asked by the bookstore to submit my list of texts for Spanish 308: In-

roduction to Literary Studies in Spanish, a course I would be teaching during spring semester 1998. I thought to myself, with Spanish Conversation, Spanish Composition, Survey of Latin American Literature, Survey of Peninsular Literature, Contemporary Latin American Narrative and the *Quijote* all being taught during the same semester, I would be lucky to have ten students in the course. So I ordered ten copies of each text we were going to study. When I arrived at class, there were eighteen students present. Estelle Findley, my colleague who was teaching Spanish Composition one hour earlier, had expected no more than eighteen students, since that was the limit established for the course by the department. She ended up with twenty-two. The two sections of Spanish Conversation were full, the two survey courses had eighteen and ten students, and Contemporary Latin American Narrative had eleven students. Only the *Quijote* course struggled to maintain the six to seven students necessary so that the provost wouldn't cancel the class, but even so, that was a decent showing for Peninsular Literature at Spelman College. In the 1997–98 academic year, there were fifty Spanish majors and forty-five Spanish minors, and next fall there will be seventeen graduating seniors with a major in Spanish who will be taking comprehensive exams administered by the Department of Foreign Languages as an exit exam.

The numbers in French are also increasing; in 1997–98 there were eighteen majors in French and thirty minors.

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*The author is Associate Professor of Spanish at Spelman College. This article is based on his presentation at ADFL Seminar West, 25–27 June 1998, in Victoria, British Columbia.*

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Spelman does not currently offer a major or minor in either Latin or Japanese, although a Japan studies minor is being planned for the future. Besides elementary and intermediate Japanese, we offer advanced Japanese and independent study in Japanese, and there are elementary- and intermediate-level courses offered in Latin. During spring semester 1998, these languages also showed healthy numbers: fifty-three students in Japanese and forty-two in Latin. There seems to be a high level of interest in studying foreign languages at Spelman, and this paper analyzes what we are doing to interest students in the study of foreign languages, especially above the intermediate level; points out possible future pitfalls; and shows how we are spreading the word about foreign language study. I gathered information from Morehouse College as well, and I make reference to my findings.

The Department of Foreign Languages at Spelman boasts twelve full-time faculty members, six of whom are tenured, while eight professors have doctoral degrees. Of the full-time faculty members, seven teach Spanish, four French, and one Japanese, and the department regularly employs a part-time instructor to teach Latin. In the fall of 1998 a total of 481 students took the language placement exam in Spanish, so we have at least three part-time instructors to take care of an increasing number of students enrolled in elementary- and intermediate-level Spanish courses.

I think that one key to my department's success so far has been a certain degree of flexibility to answer students' needs. Three years ago the department I worked in was called the Department of Modern Foreign Languages. However, because quite a few freshmen were arriving from states such as California with experience in Latin and requesting that the department accept Latin as a foreign language to fulfill the core requirement at the college, it was considered unfair to disregard the Latin experience these students had in high school and oblige them to start another foreign language at Spelman. Consideration was also given to the fact that Spelman could populate its classes with students from the five other Atlanta University Center institutions, which share a common schedule, so the word *modern* was dropped from the department's title and a part-time instructor was recruited to teach classes in Latin up to the intermediate level.

Another change in the department's offerings came about because of changes in the institution itself. Spelman designed a two-semester sequence called African Diaspora and the World to replace its World Civilization and World Literature requirement for all first-year students. In this course students were exposed to Brazilian culture, and some of them became interested in Portuguese. These students then began to lobby for the introduction of Portuguese at Spelman. Because of the extensive African influence in Brazil and because of the

interest at the Atlanta University Center in things African, money was found in the African Diaspora and the World budget to fund an initial two years of Portuguese language study at the college. Our hope was that, if the program were successful, the college would fund the program as it does Latin. So the Department of Foreign Languages advertised for a part-time Portuguese instructor, interviewed various candidates, none of whom had a master's degree in the language, and chose a native Brazilian with a degree in economics. The course was advertised, and twelve students enrolled in Portuguese 101. Unfortunately, the chosen native Brazilian found a full-time job and decided to take it. The back-up candidate, another native Brazilian, who had taught at the International School of Atlanta, could not relate to the students and turned them off the Portuguese language. The program had to be suspended after one semester. Its reintroduction will depend on the vision of the new provost, the interest of the students, the ability of the department to find a suitable instructor, and, to a certain extent, the visibility of Brazil in world affairs. The experiment did not work out in this instance, but the institution and the Department of Foreign Languages were prepared to meet the students' needs.

Spelman enjoys a luxury that majority-white institutions do not: a large body of African American students, most of them with foreign language experience in high school, to entice into studying a foreign language beyond the required second semester of the intermediate level. The foreign language faculty has an opportunity, by means of good teaching, to encourage those students who do not test out of the foreign language requirement to continue language study with a minor or major in Spanish or French. I have seen this work with students who came to Spelman intending to major in such subjects as biology, psychology, economics, or engineering but who found that their real strengths and interests lay in a foreign language or in combining a foreign language with biology, psychology, economics, international studies, music, or political science. At Morehouse the experience has been the same, and the head of the department adds that students switch to a major in Spanish or French because they have an openness to other cultural experiences or wish to travel or because they become disillusioned with other majors. There are also other factors at play here. Spelman is attracting more students whose parents or grandparents are Hispanic in origin—from Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Panama, Cuba, Mexico, or the Dominican Republic. These students have an interest in connecting with their Hispanic origin and take courses above the required intermediate level, even though they may not be majors or minors in Spanish. The word has also spread among African Americans, especially those who hail from California, New York, New Mexico, Texas, Illinois, and Florida, that to be well prepared for the job market in the United States these days it is to their

advantage to know a foreign language, especially Spanish. The foreign language faculty no longer has to emphasize this fact to future teachers, doctors, lawyers, psychologists, accountants, business and advertising executives, or entrepreneurs. It is a practical fact of life in the United States. That is why every fall semester since I have been at Spelman there have been at least eight sections of intermediate Spanish—201 and 202—and the chair of the Department of Foreign Languages has had to call the provost to ask whether she would authorize the hiring of additional part-time instructors for more sections of Spanish, and that is why the numbers of majors and minors in Spanish are on the increase. The growth of French and Japanese might be explained by the increasing emphasis by college administrators on the internationalization of the campus and by the real effect of economic globalization and in particular Japan's impact on it.

For students who do not place out of intermediate Spanish and French but are not yet ready for 300-level courses, an intensive intermediate course is offered to the Honors Department, although it is open to the college community and geared toward potential majors and minors. These classes typically have no more than fifteen students, move along much more quickly than the second-semester intermediate course, and up to now seem to have stimulated participants' interest in continuing foreign language study.

When the department is adopting texts for the elementary and intermediate levels of Spanish, I try to find and recommend texts that reflect a multicultural reality of Latin America and the Caribbean and that have made an effort to include characters of Afro-Hispanic or African American descent in accompanying photos, drawings, and videos. On the elementary level, we are pleased with *¡Hola, Amigos!* by Ana C. Jarvis, Raquel Lebrede, and Francisco Mena-Ayllón. The authors have made a sincere effort to be inclusive in the book's depiction of the Latin American cultural landscape. In my classes I complement this search in test items by referring to the names, literary works, or deeds of important African Americans in the United States. For example, in dealing with the comparative in Spanish, I can ask students to compare Joe Louis with Muhammed Ali; or, if we are doing a translation involving the superlative in Spanish, I can create a sentence like "In my opinion, *Beloved* is the best novel Toni Morrison has written so far." The attempt here is to relate to the reality of the African American while teaching Hispanic culture, and it seems to enhance the comfort level of the elementary and intermediate Spanish students I have taught at Spelman. That our full-time faculty of twelve in French and Spanish includes one Algerian and four professors of African descent may act not only to increase the comfort level of the students taking courses in these languages but also to encourage them to study French or Spanish as majors or minors. I know from my own experience as an undergraduate at the University of

New Brunswick that there were no professors of African descent in the Department of Romance Languages and very few students from Africa or the African diaspora present in my Spanish classes, but I did have caring professors, and that made a great difference to me as a major in Spanish. What was also important to me at that stage was a small community of foreign students, from the Caribbean, Africa, and India, and our Canadian friends who made the experience away from home more bearable. Because the vast majority of students at Spelman are African American, they have a ready-made community to which they can relate. However, majority-white colleges and universities that wish to attract African Americans to their departments of romance or foreign languages and encourage them to stay there as majors and minors may need to ensure that the larger institution has a community with which these African American students can interact. Of course, the hiring of good, caring African American professors may help, since they can serve as role models and pique the interest of African American students in foreign language programs.

Another way I sought to interest African American students in Spanish and Hispanic culture at the intermediate level and beyond was the initiation of a four-week summer study-travel program in the Dominican Republic, which required students to have at least Spanish 102, the second semester of the elementary sequence, in order to participate. This was, however, not my intention when I first arrived at Spelman. A similar program sponsored by Spelman and Morehouse Colleges in Oaxaca, Mexico, was in full swing when I arrived in 1989, and I served as codirector of that program during the summer of 1993. The following year I was slated to become director of the Spelman-Morehouse program in Oaxaca. But when I decided that the program should visit the black communities on the Pacific coast of Mexico as a major excursion highlight, there was opposition to this notion, probably because such a change was considered too radical at the time. So I decided to secure the contacts and approval necessary to set up a program in the Dominican Republic at the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra in Santiago. The plan still had to overcome the fears of some faculty members at Morehouse and Spelman that another summer program would take students away from the Oaxaca program and thus undermine it. Nevertheless, it was approved by the Spelman administration and the curriculum committee. The Spelman summer study-travel program in the Dominican Republic has just completed its fourth year, and each year it has attracted twelve to sixteen Spelman and Morehouse students from the intermediate and third-year levels of Spanish. The students pay an average of \$2,400 for four weeks of intensive Spanish, complemented by homestays and meals with Dominican host families and weekend excursions to various places of interest in the Dominican Republic. Students receive credit for two courses and can choose

from a menu of options that include intermediate grammar, intermediate conversation, grammar and composition, advanced conversation, and an advanced culture course, Social Dominican Themes. Additionally, until this past summer, a professor in the Department of Foreign Languages at Clark Atlanta University had been taking students to the Dominican Republic to study for four weeks in Santo Domingo, the capital. The Oaxaca program had twenty-five participants during the summer of 1998 and this past summer did take the students to visit the black communities on the Pacific Coast of Mexico. Finally, the Spelman–Clark Atlanta program to Martinique, similar to the Oaxaca and Dominican programs and designed to give French students study-abroad opportunities in the summer, had fifteen participants, so there were no complaints from the competition.

I know of undeclared majors and minors whose interest was so stimulated by their experience abroad in the Dominican Republic that they were considering a major or minor in Spanish on their return to the United States, and I know of two cases where the summer program acted as a feeder to the semester-abroad program run by the Council on International Educational Exchange at the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra. Indeed, the president of Spelman has openly expressed to the students her desire that they gain some international experience before they graduate, and the faculty members of the Department of Foreign Languages tell majors in French and Spanish that they are expected to spend a semester or year abroad. Students have responded enthusiastically, especially since they can use the tuition they pay Spelman to finance their study abroad. They travel as far south as Chile and Argentina to study Spanish or to France and French-speaking Africa to study French. Because of the emphasis on international experience and the provision of study-abroad venues where Spelman students can gain this experience, last year the Spelman administration sent me to Puerto Rico and Costa Rica to explore the possibility of setting up student-exchange and study-abroad opportunities with Inter American University of Puerto Rico, San Germán Campus, and the University of Costa Rica. An agreement was reached with Inter American University of Puerto Rico, and during fall semester 1997 Leslie Clement, of Puerto Rican heritage and a major in Spanish who intends to pursue an MA and a PhD in Spanish after graduating from Spelman, was able to spend a semester on the San Germán campus. She then spent the following spring semester in the Dominican Republic at the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra and loved the experience so much that she returned to the Dominican Republic as program assistant for the four-week intensive summer program. Despite repeated attempts, however, there has been no follow-up communication with Spelman on the part of the University of Costa Rica. Still, I have not given up on Costa Rica and have established contact

with the Afro–Costa Rican novelist Quince Duncan, who teaches at the National University of Costa Rica in Heredia. He believes that an agreement between Spelman and his university is possible. Students with a desire to further their studies in Japanese complete the intermediate level at Spelman, travel to Tokyo or Nagoya to study advanced Japanese, and on their return enter Japanese 401: Independent Study. Spelman also has a student-exchange program with the University of the West Indies, Jamaica Campus, and domestic exchange programs with such United States schools as Wellesley College and New York University.

There was no opposition to two other courses I proposed on the 300 and 400 levels to maintain the interest of students who were majors and minors in Spanish. The first was Spanish 443: Afro-Hispanic Literature, only one of whose writers, Nicolás Guillén, is regularly featured in literary anthologies on Spanish American literature. In this way, I was able to broaden the canon to include Hispanic writers of African descent in countries such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Peru. During our recent trip to the Dominican Republic, students were able to meet Blas Jiménez, a Dominican poet and strong advocate of the recognition of the African heritage in the Dominican Republic. He showed us the ruins of a sugar mill and plantation near the capital, and he told us about the horrible living and working conditions of the slaves who had worked there while the absentee landowner, in faraway Madrid, enjoyed the spoils of their labor. The students were glad to see and hear the other side of the official story and found this to be an unforgettable experience. Recognizing the value of a course such as Afro-Hispanic Literature to its students, both Morehouse College and Clark Atlanta University now also teach courses in the same area.

The second course I proposed grew out of my experience with the papers students were writing for the Afro-Hispanic Literature course and the students' need to know how to analyze a literary text and write a research paper. There was a gap between the intermediate-level and the 400-level courses that the composition course was not filling. To help majors and minors write better papers in Spanish, I proposed a course, Analysis of Literary Texts in Spanish, that would not only teach students how to analyze a text but also show them how to write and rewrite papers using library research tools and the *MLA Style Manual*. Shortly after piloting the course, I was asked by the curriculum committee to change the title to parallel that of a course being taught in the English Department, and so the course title was changed to Introduction to Literary Texts in Spanish. In both the Afro-Hispanic Literature course and this course, I discovered an alarming trend that might eventually threaten the number of majors and minors taking Spanish at Spelman: the resistance of our students to reading. And even

more alarming is a resistance to literature itself on the part of some of our majors and minors. Our students live in a culture where the visual image with its immediate sensual gratification seems to predominate. At the elementary and intermediate levels we recognize the appeal of the visual image and rarely adopt texts that do not have an abundance of realia and glossy color images of cultural events and peoples from throughout the Hispanic world. Students cannot expect the same from a reasonably priced text of Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna* or Adalberto Ortiz's *Juyungo*.

As you can imagine, students fear and detest the comprehensive exam, with its essay questions based on a list of ten texts drawn from Peninsular and Latin American literature; but the exam is a requirement for graduation with a major in Spanish, and they grudgingly take it. At one of our meetings for majors and minors, students asked why there couldn't be more courses on Latin American history and on themes such as women in Latin America and fewer courses on literature. We explained the difference between a major in Latin American studies, which is what the students were advocating, and the major in Spanish, where the focus at the third and fourth levels is mainly on literature. Part of the current problem is that prospective majors and minors can simply pick up the course requirements for majors and minors and indicate their choice on forms for the department and the registrar's office without being screened by professors in the Department of Foreign Languages. We need to change this practice and screen prospective majors and minors, making them aware of what is involved in language study at an advanced level. We may also need to rethink what constitutes a major in Spanish or French. The introduction of a major in Latin American studies, with the study of Spanish, French, and Portuguese as a requirement, is desirable since it would lead to the reintroduction of Portuguese and to increased enrollment in French and Spanish, but Spelman College has yet to commit resources to the establishment of a major or minor in Latin American studies, although talks have been going on for several years.

How do we attract students who have finished the language requirement but who do not wish to become majors or minors in a foreign language? Every fall there are quite a few students who are exempt from the language requirement at Spelman because of prior experience and good scores on the placement exam and the subsequent oral interview. What courses do we have for these students in the Department of Foreign Languages? The French wing introduced a successful course, French for Business, in the fall 1997 semester, and during the fall semester 1998 a colleague in the Spanish wing introduced a two-credit sequence on the media and Hispanic culture. Since many of our students are computer literate, this colleague seeks to maintain the interest of students who enroll in his Spanish composition class by using the

technology of the computer classroom; other colleagues in Spanish and French are following suit and taking workshops to be able to use the computer classroom too. Unfortunately, my proposal for a grant from UNCF / Prudential (to develop a course teaching education majors Spanish language skills to help them deal effectively with students of Hispanic origin) was not funded. Nevertheless members of the Department of Foreign Languages continue exploring ways to serve other majors and minors and the college community. During the spring 2000 semester, a colleague and I will team-teach in English for the second time a 300-level elective course that we developed for the honors program, *The Universe of the Woman of Color in Afro-Hispanic Literature*, which in fall 1997 drew twelve students from the honors program and the college community at large, especially students interested in women's studies. Other courses offered to the college community in English by the Department of Foreign Languages are Francophone and French Cinema and Latin American Cinema. These courses in English are taught by foreign language faculty members who use translated texts and dubbed films or films with English subtitles. Course for future development might include Spanish for Business and Spanish for Medicine.

What do our majors in Spanish and French actually do after graduation? Only a few students go on to graduate school to study Spanish, French, linguistics, or translation. To my knowledge—and this is an area where better tracking at Spelman is an absolute necessity—four Spelman alumnae are currently studying literature, linguistics, or translation on a graduate level, while of the Morehouse men one is studying for a PhD in Hispanic literature at the University of Puerto Rico, one was doing graduate studies in Mexico and Ecuador during the 1997–98 academic year, and one was engaged in further studies in French at the Sorbonne in Paris. A larger number of our majors in French and Spanish go into elementary and high school teaching, and others are involved with immigration, the United States Army, the United States Department of Corrections, broadcasting, the Peace Corps, or customer service. Judging from the letters of recommendation my colleagues and I have been writing, the current preferred career path among our graduating majors in Spanish is the study of law; others study history, black studies, business, medicine, dentistry, or anthropology. The career path of one 1991 Morehouse graduate comes immediately to mind. A major in Spanish to whom I taught Afro-Hispanic literature and Latin American civilization and culture at Spelman, he was an assistant professor of biology at Spelman College in 1997–98 and now teaches in a community college. I did not allow him to forget the language of his undergraduate major; oftentimes when we met at the elevator or in the cafeteria, we spoke in Spanish.

To sum up, I would like to spell out some of the conditions I deem favorable to the retention of African American students at colleges and universities:

- institutions with the will and the resources to recruit qualified African American and international students to provide a sense of community
- recruitment by departments of foreign languages of qualified African Americans or persons of African heritage to serve as full-time and part-time faculty members and role models to African American students
- development of courses that African Americans can relate to and, at least in courses on contemporary Latin American literature, the incorporation of prominent Afro-Hispanic writers such as Nicolás Guillén, Manuel Zapata Olivella, or Nancy Morejón into the canon
- development of courses by the foreign language faculty that appeal to the college or university community at large
- study-abroad opportunities that include the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica, or other countries where African Americans can encounter people who look like them
- supportive faculty members who honor their office hours so that African American students can receive help when they need it
- provision of foreign language tutors
- on the elementary and intermediate levels, selection of texts that reflect multicultural realities, including Afro-Hispanic reality
- active campaigning by departments of foreign languages to show United States citizens and permanent residents the career benefits of studying a foreign language
- a language requirement of at least two semesters at the intermediate level as a way of stimulating African Americans to study foreign languages beyond the second year

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### Work Cited

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